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The Queen of the Desert – A Journey

By Yakarah Attias-Rosen

Introduction

The Queen of the Desert Project is a unique stand-alone venture in the arena of “organized trips abroad” because it encourages extreme sport for women. Its main value is the empowerment of women by women and the leveraging of this power to create activities for women and for the community.

The participants that are chosen (yes, hand-picked), self-drive jeeps in uncharted terrain, surrounded by breathtaking views and wild landscapes. During this journey, these women experience extreme sports activities, get to engage with and experience direct contact with the local culture and people and also have an opportunity to give back a little to society.

This journey is for every woman who believes in herself and knows that she can handle both the physical and mental challenges, encounters with the diverse and the different and with crossing both geographical and personal boundaries.

This being said, the personal differences among the women participating on this trip become very blurry during this special encounter, as they have no choice but to join forces with one another and are required to cooperate and work as a team. The women are required to show creativity, imagination, patience and tolerance, the ability to deal with rough conditions and a lot of willingness to be open to new experiences.

China – where women rule

Each year the Queen of the Desert chooses a new destination which is kept completely secret until the unveiling at an extravagant party to which all Queen veterans are invited.

All the trips that go out in that year head toward the same location, thus creating a group of 500-600 women who all share a similar, yet different experience. This alone creates an unspoken bond between all those who ventured out to that destination in that year.

The year I joined the Queen of the Desert the destination was China.

I knew that we would be traveling to the Yunnan Region¹ one of the most diverse and interesting areas of China, on the border with Tibet, Burma, Laos and Vietnam. Here you encounter snowy mountain tops alongside rice fields, picturesque villages and a breathtaking human and cultural landscape also made up of minority tribes. One of these is the Nakhi² (pronounced “Nashi”) tribe and we were going to be hosted by them during our journey. It is interesting to discover that the Nakhi tribe in the south of China is one of the last ethnic minorities still led and run solely by women.

The Nakhi and the Musuo³ are two of the 55 ethnic minority groups living in the Yunnan Region. They continue to lead their lives according to their own rules, which are based on the strength and the superiority of the woman in the family and allow her complete and total freedom from the social conventions we are used to. For instance, it has been customary for hundreds of years that you can love and be in a relationship without being formally married or even having to live together. The Nakhi realized a long time ago that a child can be certain of their mother’s identity, but not necessarily of their father’s, and that logic clearly states that it should be the child’s mother who should be responsible for their education, economic future and well-being. This is why the woman is the successor and the inheritor and the dominant figure in the family in these tribes.



¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yunnan_Province,_Republic_of_China

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nakhi_people

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mosuo>

Different, yet similar

Just the thought of what might be similar or different between the group of women I was traveling with and the women of this tribe excited me. Getting the opportunity to see how female dominance in the Chinese Naxhi tribe is translated in day-to-day life was inspiring.

One cannot help but make a comparison between the women in this minority matriarchal tribe whom we met while traveling through the Yunnan Region, and the 40 powerful women who joined me on this journey to China, and who had chosen to disconnect themselves completely from all that is familiar and embrace the opportunity to find the courage to truly meet themselves from within – together with women from their home country and those from a very different one.



For many women who traveled to China that year, this encounter was a turning point from which they drew strength from others to take action, change and/or control, firstly and foremostly, their own lives.

Entering the unknown...

Nothing can really prepare you for a journey of this kind, especially since you are kept on a “need to know” basis from the beginning – and apparently, you don’t need to know anything!

The route of the trip is kept completely secret (and is known only to the team leading the trip together with a local guide), a proper introduction to the 40 women joining you for this experience is more or less only really done at the airport before you board the plane and the extreme activities that you are going to experience along the way are only revealed after you have put the safety harness on.



For many women, who spend their lives in control of their surroundings, planning their day, their schedule, their children's schedule, family obligations, meals, household chores and activities etc., this is not an easy feat or experience. You are forced to let go of being in control, of being the one who makes the decisions. You give into the vagueness, into the ambiguity, in fact, in the end it is almost blissful how you do not always have to have the answer or always be the one turned to for solutions.

When you return, you will understand

From the moment I left home, I started asking myself why? (or to be more exact: what in the world am I doing here?).

Clearly there were some women who came to see China (myself included), some who wanted to meet the physical challenge and those who came for the combination of the two.

The question "WHY" each one of us had come: why now; why this year; why this trip; turned out to be the most interesting question of all – for all of us.

Some knew exactly why they had embarked on this journey, what it was that they were searching for, what they wanted to leave behind. Some carried stories of overcoming illness, changing lifestyles and losing loved ones. And then there were others, who even after they had returned home, bags filled with lots of beautiful cheap little Chinese gifts, were still asking themselves this question, myself included.

I could not really put my finger on what it was that drew me to this experience, but I knew there was some reason, we all did – otherwise we would not have found ourselves in a little village on the other side of the world with another 40 women.

"When you return, you will understand" is the slogan that the Queen of the Desert has on its banner, and even though it reminds me of the slightly annoying slogan "When you grow up, you will understand," as if it is the sole knowledge of a secret group, there is definitely something to it.

Every day that passed after my return, I understood more and more...how this had been a powerful and empowering experience and that it would take me quite a while before I would be really able to process it.

The rituals – a window into your unique potential

“A ‘ritual’ is a sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and performed according to a set sequence”⁴ as acknowledgment or to effect change. We could also say that a ritual is any activity that we perform at least as much for its *symbolic and emotional value* as for its practical value.

The journeys created by the Queen of the Desert put a big emphasis on these rituals, because these acts in themselves have meaning, or because doing it makes us feel better about ourselves, or both. These rituals help form a community and this is an important factor when looking for meaning, purpose and direction in your life. A simple way to describe having “meaning” in your life is that it’s about being part of something that we really believe in, that is bigger than ourselves. Studies of people who believe their lives “have meaning” show big benefits for well-being and Martin Seligman – the founder of positive psychology – describes meaning as a vital component of happiness and well-being.⁵

I think that one of the reasons for this is that although most people need to be part of a community for life’s necessities, many want to be part of a community because there is something indescribably lovely about being a part of a group of people who share something more substantial than geographical location... something they feel passionately about. Something which, when shared, makes individuals seem less lonely and helps them find meaning in what they are doing and sharing.



⁴ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ritual>

⁵ Seligman, M.E.P. (2011). *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*. NY: Free Press.

In preparation for our trip we had been divided into groups of four, which had been pre-decided by the team leading our journey. These were the only women we would actually have the opportunity to get to know a little better before leaving the country.

Each group of four had been given an activity they had to plan and a gift they would have to give that would be disclosed to the other participants at some point along our journey and would be presented in some kind of ritual – and while we ourselves knew what our activity and gift would be, we did not know when this disclosure would take place – like I said before, ambiguity and “letting go” is the name of the game.

So already before leaving home, in groups of four, we started planning rituals that we would be responsible for. Something creative, fun and meaningful which for many of us helped us discover and express our own unique gifts.

In the departure hall at the airport, the sense of community is already sparked when you walk in and find another 30 or so women dressed in exactly the same clothes you are wearing.

The first ritual is the creation of a joint necklace. It is a fun act that tries to help us open the door to thinking about our aspirations. What is it that I would like to start searching for? What fear or concern I might have embarking on this journey? One bead for aspiration, one bead for a fear...this ritual is also the final one, as these beads are then given back to each of the women as a charm for them to keep with them, to remind them of their journey.

The 18-hour flight to Yunnan is also sprinkled with gifts from different groups, something small that shows thoughtfulness and caring, something creative like little pillows handcrafted by one of the women... 10 days of little gifts, creations and self-expression that allowed us all to feel appreciated, loved and for some to understand what direction they should possibly take in their lives, both professionally and personally.

Rituals are created constantly along the way, one for receiving the jeeps, one for quiet times in the morning, one for when we got to the top of a mountain and entered a Tibetan monastery, one for after we had all rappelled down the dam right beside a waterfall, one for thanking the Nakhi women and the list goes on and on.



Moreover, each of these rituals was carried out during all of the journeys to China by the groups of women who journeyed there before and after us. Some might have taken a slightly different form, or have contained some different gifts and ideas, but there was a clear feeling that just knowing that we were carrying out an action that had been performed by others around us, either before or after us, connected us with this community of individuals.

The community – a way to continue...

At the end of the journey you come home with the taste for “more”, which is translated into what is called the “Queens’ Club.” This is a unique community that was born from the women themselves after they came back from their experiences. They wanted to harness the energy and fire that was sparked during their trips into something bigger and better.

This completely voluntary community does a lot of social activity in cooperation with many foundations and organizations and acts as a social and business network which also organizes social events throughout the year for the women to meet.

The “Queens” that come back from their journeys are automatically part of this community. Each activity is unique and special and each woman in her own way can take part, be active and influence the work and activities that take place all through the year.

Over the years, experience has shown that after these women return from their journey, many of them take a different route in life and become freelancers or develop their own businesses. Business cooperation and joint endeavors develop between the women and the networking, which at the beginning is spontaneous, flourishes.

After giving birth, many women take time out from the business world for maternity leave and often after doing this, many contacts and networks in the business world disappear. By creating this community these women become a support group for one another and help

each other back into this world thus also creating a huge platform of contacts, connections and clients.

As for me....

It has now been 5 years since my first journey to China and five years that I have been part of this amazing community. I experienced myself in many different situations, spending hours on end in a jeep with the same women when sometimes all you want is your own quiet space, difficult physical situations such as extreme cold and tiredness while having to support your companions and work as a team. Overcoming fear when experiencing extreme activities and difficult driving.

Showering only with a bucket of cold water and being able to accept the fact that often there will be no “real toilets” or showers for days. All of these have taught me important lessons about who I am, my level of resilience and ability to see things through and have moved me to try and give back a little of what I gained.



The teams that lead the journeys are made up of three women that meet up with a local team in the country they are traveling in – the “Professional guide” who knows the country we are visiting and the route of the trip, the “Logistic guide” who takes care of all the physical needs of the women on the trip from making sure they have clothes to wear to making sure they have food to eat and the “Social guide” who is there to prepare the women before they leave, guide them in developing their activities, giving them support before, during and after the trip. These social guides are basically taking the role of containing and holding the group together – as many bring with them stories of loss, pain, searching and enquiring which is what brings them to this unique place of understanding what direction their life should take.

When I returned, I became part of the group of women who became “Social Guides.” I took a group of 40 women to India in the hope of giving them the gift of starting a journey that might help them understand themselves better, their needs, hopes and desires. I also

joined the training network of this community, teaching the “social instructors” how best to support these women that they would be taking on this journey and how to help them express themselves and their uniqueness.

The Queen of the Desert also has quite a few volunteer projects open to all of the women who have experienced the journeys and are part of the community. Fundraiser days for women trying to escape the cycle of domestic violence, rehabilitation work with women convicts who have served their time, redecorating and fixing homes and hostels for youth at risk are just some examples of how these women can give back to society together as a community, thus enjoying time with their fellow “Queens” and finding worth in their actions.

To all those women along the years who have heard that I went on the “Queen of the Desert” and tell me that this is their dream, I say, fulfill this dream – you owe it to you yourself and nothing I can describe comes close to the truth – only when you return, will you understand!

Author

Yakarah Attias-Rosen is Head of Operations for the Learning for Well-Being Foundation. Born in Johannesburg, South Africa to British parents, Yakarah lived in Cape Town and then moved to Dublin, Ireland where her father held the position of Chief Rabbi of Ireland. In 1985, at the age of 11, she moved with her family to Israel. Today she lives in Lappid, Israel with her husband and three children.

Yakarah holds a Bachelor’s degree from the Hebrew University and a Master’s in Business Management from the Polytechnic University in New York. Over the past five years she has been developing and leading empowerment retreats for Israeli Women in cooperation with the “Queen of the Desert” organization in Israel. She loves meeting new people, traveling the world, good food, running and has found a new interest in Yoga.